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FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9537
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L BAGHDAD 000451

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/08/2017

TAGS: PGOV IZ

SUBJECT: PM INSIDER AL-ASKARI ON DEBAATHIFICATION, SUNNI LEADERS, AND MINISTERIAL CHANGES

Classified By: Political Counselor Margaret Scobey for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) CoR member and Prime Minister insider Sami al-Askari told PolCouns on February 7 that the Shi'a coalition, with the possible exception of the Sadrists, was ready to make changes to deBaathification legislation. Noting that deBaathification reform was the single most important current legislative initiative for the reconciliation process, PolCouns pressed al-Askari to support reform that would focus the punitive side of deBaathification on those who had committed crimes and those who were in the very highest ranks of the Baath party, while allowing lower ranking members who had not committed crimes (i.e., the overwhelming majority) to return to their jobs or receive pensions. Al-Askari expressed concern that the victims of the Baath regime would be forgotten but acknowledged that the 2007 budget allocated money for victims' compensation. He also said that issues such as land taken by leading Baathists needed to be resolved. Finally, he characterized Tawafiq as "wanting to abolish deBaathification all together."

¶2. (C) Al-Askari went on to harshly criticize Sunni leaders such as Salih al-Mutlaq, Khalaf al-Ayyan, Adnan Dulaimi, and Tarik al-Hashemi. He characterized them as "extremists who do not believe in democracy." Their strategy, he claimed, was to use the media to portray the situation in Iraq as a civil war to force the U.S. to withdraw and to force regional powers to get involved. "They think there is a Taif option, whereby each community gets one third," he continued. PolCouns observed that processes like deBaathification reform offered the Shi'a a chance to make a strong gesture of reconciliation to Sunnis, forcing Sunni leaders to make hard and transparent choices about whether to support the political process.

¶3. (C) Al-Askari said that "we" (i.e., the PM's staff and confidantes, including him) had interviewed candidates proposed by the Sadrists for the Minister of Agriculture and the ministers of state for civil society and governorate affairs, and that they would interview candidates for the Minister of Health next week. He said that it was possible the PM would name Rafi al-Isawi (Tawafiq) as Minister of Health, but that there would "need to be an exchange." Although the PM wanted to replace the Minister of Culture (currently Tawafiq), al-Askari continued, the Sadrists would not accept exchanging the Minister of Health for the Minister of Culture. Another option under consideration, he said, was for the Sadrists to allow the PM complete freedom in choosing the Minister of Health in return for giving a Sadrist candidate the deputy position.

KHALILZAD